DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 385 117 FL 022 119

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TITLE LABLIB--A Foreign Language Software Databank.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of International Association of Language Laboratories (1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Audiovisual Aids; Cataloging; Computer Software; Databases; Foreign Countries; *Indexing; *Instructional Materials; *Online Catalogs; Online Searching; Program Descriptions; Second Language Instruction; *Second Languages
IDENTIFIERS *Finland; *LABLIB

ABSTRACT

LABLIB, a recently-developed Finnish databank for cataloging video, audio, and computer materials for second language instruction, is described. The objective was a computer-based program that would require little or no specialized computer knowledge of the user. The user has 14 search variables (bibliographic, content, format) by which to search for appropriate instructional materials. The report describes the origins of the project to develop LABLIB, database usage parameters, other design considerations, selection of search variables, and the predicted future of such a system in Finland. Appended materials include a brief bibliography on LABLIB, including the manual pre-systems, and a series of three screens illustrating the computer program's design. (MSE)

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Pirkko H. Lindqvist: **LABLIB** - A Foreign Language Software Databank
Presentation at IALL'93

ED 385 117

Abstract

At the Language Centre of Turku University, Finland, a database system called LABLIB was created for cataloging video, audio and computer materials. The aim was to develop a program which would not demand any special computer knowledge from the user. The LABLIB database was created on an IBM compatible PC using the dBase IV software.

The user has at his/her disposal 14 search variables which facilitate the search for suitable material. There are limited menus behind most of the variables, which show on the screen after pressing 'enter'. These variables, which can also be used in various combinations, are the following:

- title of program
- linguistic variant (e.g. American English)
- type of text (e.g. news, lecture)
- degree of difficulty and authenticity
- grammatical features (practical categories like pronouns)
- language exercise type (e.g. note-taking)
- additional materials (e.g. maps)
- UNESCO index (number- and letter codes from UNESCO-Thesaurus)
- communication event (Strasbourg "threshold-level descriptors" in applied form for subject matter, situation, role, etc)
- description of contents both in target language and Finnish (any key word can be used as a search criterion)
- program identifier
- producer/publisher
- time of purchase.

At Turku University over 2500 English-language programs and units have been described in this form and the system is also in use at the Helsinki and Jyväskylä Language Centre among others.

The Starting Point and main Goals of Lablib

An integral part of the functions of the Finnish Language Centres is the acquisition of teaching materials and the transmission of information about them to both teachers and students. In 1974 I was involved in a project at the University of Jyväskylä where the National Language Centre was founded. In this context the idea of a databank seemed to me the best solution for the transmission task.

However, the time was not yet ready for the realisation of the plan, so just the idea moved with me back to the Turku university. The plan was further developed in the early 1980's as a hobby at home, where my son wrote small computer software. Later the idea was worked out with the assistance of some student workers during summer periods. The latest period of developing Lablib for net use was financed by the Ministry of Education in -91. Currently the eighth generation of the program is in use.

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The main goals for the development of Lablib were as follows:

* There should be available comprehensive information about audio-visual programs, as bibliographical data is not informative enough.
* It should be possible to search for teaching materials using several criteria at the same time.
* The system should be easy to use without additional booklets or manuals.
* The system should be bilingual so that Finns may use it in Finnish and foreigners in English (or any other L1 and L2).
* All information should be centralised to one location so that updating is carried out only at one location and thus all users have access to the latest information.
* The information should be available on LAN (Local Area Networks) for the whole campus.
* The search criteria should contain as much general information as possible, which could be easily described by material producers such as publishing companies.

The General Framework for Lablib

The financial resources for developing Lablib were limited. Therefore dBASE IV was selected as the program frame despite its unsuitability for the purpose. At the moment Lablib is taken care of by Aboatec Co, which develops innovations from the three local universities into finished products. As a result a new, more suitable program frame will - hopefully - be selected. The 'final' alterations will also include the follow-up of material use and lending.

One big local problem in developing an av-databank is the lack of an organisational frame. There are hardly any Learning Resource Centres at Finnish universities. Therefore, collecting information on teaching materials from different departments (e.g. cultural history, art history etc) is for the time being a problem. This collecting is useful in many ways. For instance the visual materials (like slides) in art departments could be used for background teaching in languages. This was one of the aspects during the development of Lablib.

Some Remarks to Search Criteria used

The index system introduced by UNESCO (Unesco Thesaurus. Compiled by Jean Aichison. Unesco 1977) was adapted for the description of the factual content of av-materials. This aspect is essential also for LSP-teaching. A general effort should be made to spread the use of the indices in didactic descriptions as none of the library indexing-systems is world wide. Furthermore Unesco-indices which consist of numbers and letters can be used in any language.

The communication event features are described by using the threshold level system for English developed by the European Council (van Ek, J.A. 1991. The threshold level for modern language learning in schools. London: Longman). These include, for instance, topics, settings, social roles and various speech acts. The communication event enables one to find materials e.g. about expressions used in telephone conversations or/and when talking about the weather.

The menus for 'linguistic variant'(mostly to describe dialects), 'genre' (textual form), 'degree of difficulty and authenticity', 'grammatical features' , 'language exercise type' and 'additional materials' have lived through many stages of content and length. These menus are only a practical help for the needs of the learner, thus they are not designed for the scientific description of a language. In Finland e.g. the separation between teaching British English contra American English or Finnish Swedish contra Swedish Swedish is relevant.

If the menus do not allow the necessary level of detailed choice, one can look for any keyword in the 'description of content'. The problem of key-words is problematic in languages such as Finnish; even the stems of words change in different cases (ca 15 cases altogether!). One can try to look for material using indexed criteria like in 'communication event' or keyword 'telephone'. The catch with indexed methods is normally much bigger.

The Future of Lablib

The need for databanks for language teaching materials is obvious. This has been stated in a number of studies in applied linguistics (e.g. Susan Sheerin, Self-access. Language Teaching, July 1991, p. 149; more recently Lew Barnett, Computer Technology. System 3/1993, p. 297). The trend towards autonomous study requires a lot of information about available learning resources. Also publishers of teaching materials should take this into account when describing their products. Some efforts that resemble Lablib have been made, but none of them seems be as versatile and accessible as Lablib.

Building up a databank on av-materials has not been part of anyone's duties in most institutions. Thus, taking care of this task is essential only in recent plans and realications of policies for learning support services. Institutions with the name 'Learning Support Services' already exist (e.g. University of Wisconsin). The cooperation with libraries and datacentres is an essential part of these efforts.

The development of databanks is connected with development in other areas of learning and teaching services. In traditional institutions, where teaching is almost totally carried out in a senior-teacher-centered way, the motivation for creating such databanks is low. At present this seems to be true for most European language institutions. The private language schools seem to show a new way in this matter. The lack of a suitable data framework has slowed the development also there.

This status quo should not prevent us from seeing the direction of development and reacting towards those lines. The contemporary recession at universities might have surprisingly heavy long term effects; cuts in AV-centres have already been made, before their services had been updated. The time runs out. This will result into an overwhelming multitude of materials and a flow of information with no efficient means to trace it. Thus, some valuable products may end on researchers' shelves so that not even other departments in the same alma mater ever learn about their existence.

Lablib has lived for 20 years as an idea and little by little its value has been recognized. Some Finnish universities have joined in the effort and already use it, and interest has also been shown elsewhere. Carrying out this self-initiated task has been very interesting. A lot of persistence has been needed during the years.

For more information on Lablib read also the article in IALL Journal 2/92 (LABLIB - Everyman's Tool to Find Suitable Language Teaching Material).

Turku, March 1994

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Turussa 14.3.1994

Pirkko Lindqvist

Samples from Lablib

```
You can search for audiotapes with the following.                English
================================================================================
Program name        :
Variant             :
Genre               :
Exercise type       :
Additional material:
Grammar             :
Level               :
Unesco              :
Communication event:
Original language   :
description
Finnish description:

Code                :

Author / publisher  :
Year of acquisition:
```

F2 Change language. F3 Start search. F9 Return previous menu. DEL Delete value.
Use arrow-keys and RETURN for selection.

next screen ↓

```
You can search for audiotapes with the fo
=========================================
Program name        :
Variant             :
Genre               :
Exercise type       :
Additional material:
Grammar             :
Level               :
Unesco              :
Communication event:
Original language   :
description
Finnish description:

Code                :

Author / publisher  :
Year of acquisition:
```

```
Exercise type menu
==================================
Listening comprehension
Note-taking
Transformation
Reading comprehension
Repetition
Interpretation
Recognition (sounds)
Completion, dictation, writing
Oral production
Summary
Drill
Role-play
Game
```

F9 No change.
Use arrow-keys and RETURN for selection.

A search with the key word "Washington"

Record 1645 / 2443.
Program name :SOUNDINGS
Code :EN03099
Units :20
Unit number :17
Unit name :DISASTER
Variant :British English

Genre :Report, news, document

Grammar :Verbs

Level :Intermediate
Exercise type :Listening comprehension ; Completion, dictation, writing

Additional material:Exercise book

Unesco :D11.05 E72.10 D03/14

Communication event:
Original language description :A NEWS BROADCAST FROM NOVEMBER 24 198?. HEADLINES: EARTHQUAKE IN NAPLES, TALKS IN **WASHINGTON**, BOMB-EXPLOSION IN BELFAST, TEACHERS' STRIKE IN THE UK, PRINCESS DIANA'S HOLIDAY. PASSIVE.
F2 Change language. F3 Next. F4 Previous. F6 Bibl.info. F9 Quit srch. F10 Print.

next screen

Record 1645 / 2443.

Program name :SOUNDINGS

Code :EN03099
Units :20
Unit number :17
Unit name :DISASTER
Copies :
Duration : min sec
Author / publisher :JAN BELL LONGMAN
Year of publication:89
Year of acquisition:90

F2 Change language. F3 Next. F4 Previous. F6 Tape info. F9 Quit srch. F10 Print.